

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

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[Translation]

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Hello, Madam Speaker.

[Original]

I have to do a little public service announcement before I begin my questions. Today is McHappy Day. We want to make sure—and I know the Minister of Health won't want to hear me; he may want to plug his ears—that we all go to our favourite fast-food restaurant, which we know supports that organization. The money from every meal that is sold goes to children. It's helping sick kids. McHappy Day is about helping sick kids. I see the minister is giving me a thumbs up. As long as we only do it once a year, it's good. So, let's start with that.

HEALTH

Let's move on to my questions, Madam Speaker. The *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) released a report yesterday concerning the mystery brain disease. The *Journal of the American Medical Association* is one of the highest-accredited medical publications in the United States. So, I will ask the Minister of Health this: Did the New Brunswick government have any direct input into this report, or did the *Journal of the American Medical Association* simply use data from Public Health New Brunswick?

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): To the member opposite, one McHappy Day is certainly okay. If you need more, let me know.

No. We had no input into the synthesis of this report. Frankly, as a physician who has been reading journals practically my whole life, I look at reputable journals. Certainly, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* fits there. I look for articles that interest me. Certainly, this one did. The last part is this: How is it going to affect what I do next? While it has a very interesting conclusion and discussion, we are not basing our actions on this article. We have strong support for our Chief Medical Officer of Health as well as the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), and they are working collaboratively. We very much look forward to seeing the results of our own teams, our Canadian teams, and assessing folks from this community.

The simple answer is no, we did not have input. The JAMA article did use data that was made available to them—

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I truly appreciate the answer from the minister. He actually took away about six of my questions with that one answer, so he saved himself a bit of pain.

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Conducting a scientific review was a platform commitment and part of the Health Minister's mandate letter. We know that the government was going to be asking the feds for this. I believe there was a March 27 launch. To this date, has any money been spent, provincially or federally, on this investigation? Have you received any results from this, to this point?

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): To the member opposite, yes, we have received federal support. The Public Health Agency of Canada has committed staff people.

It has committed to analyzing the data that we have received, and so we are very thankful for that. You have to put the horse before the cart.

Now, we are waiting for the results of our own investigation, together with PHAC. We will determine what to do after we receive this report and analysis. We look forward to receiving the report this summer, in the coming months. Thank you.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. As I indicated, and as the Minister of Health agreed, this is a highly accredited medical journal. As a physician who has read many of these journals, do you accept the findings? Do you accept the findings of this accredited medical journal, and do you still believe that there is a mystery neurological disease in New Brunswick?

Hon. Mr. Dornan (Saint John Portland-Simonds, Minister of Health, L): To the member opposite, there are a million articles written daily, and many of these articles are valid to help lead us in the community. But it's rare that we change our habits based on a single article. Usually, we want some confirmation through other sources. So, while the article is very provocative and interesting, I am more inclined to wait for our own team's analysis of the data. It might be different from what the JAMA article suggests. Who knows? So, no, I am not going to change my opinion, my tactics, or my work with our department based on that article. Thank you.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Well, thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I actually really appreciate the minister's comments on this. At the end of the day, this is where we are supposed to be, asking questions and getting answers. We will see whether that trend can continue. I haven't yet thrown any fastballs today, but I think I'm about to start. We'll see how we make out.

NURSES

We're hearing some rumours, Madam Speaker, from registered nurses in this province that layoffs are happening, that they're being taken out of their roles, and that they're being

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replaced with LPNs. With all their training and skill, LPNs are valuable members of our health care team, but they don't have the same training as registered nurses. We know that this government, whenever it does anything, has strings attached. It provided the nurse retention bonus, but there were strings attached, because it appears that people are being laid off. I would like the Premier to confirm: Are any layoffs of RNs happening in this province?

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, and I thank the member for the question. The opportunity to talk about health care is one that I'll stand up for on a regular basis. There aren't layoffs of registered nurses happening in New Brunswick. We have a desperate need for nurses in our hospitals, in our long-term care system, and across this province. Every one of the registered nurses we employ is valuable and has employment with the province that will continue.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Well, Madam Speaker, what we're hearing is that those positions are not being filled, that people are being laid off, that they're being taken out of their positions and put back into emergency or the ICU or other areas of health care, and that their positions are being backfilled with LPNs. Again, the government members provided the retention bonus, but it seems as though there are strings attached here. Now, they're trying to save money by reallocating things, to make up for what they spent. They're doing the same thing with teachers, Madam Speaker. They're doing exactly the same thing with teachers. So what we're going to see is a health care system that is negatively impacted.

We are hearing from people who have serious concerns about the future of health care in this province because of the decisions of this government. Can the Premier confirm that LPNs are absolutely not being used to backfill any RN positions and that those positions will remain? Any LPN who wants to become an RN can use the bridging program, of course, but we want to hear from the Premier: Are LPNs being used to backfill RN positions?

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. We have serious issues in our health care system, as I think most New Brunswickers know. If you try to go to an ER, the wait times are long. There are many people who don't have access to a family doctor or a nurse practitioner or any form of permanent primary care, and that is something that our government is tackling as a priority. That is one of the reasons we issued retention bonuses to nurses to show them that our government values them and their work. That's why RNs aren't being laid off by our government. We need them, and we need them all over the system.

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We want to make sure that we are delivering the best possible health care for New Brunswickers with all the resources we have at our disposal, while we continue to recruit in order to add more people to the system. We need to make sure that our teachers and our nurses are in places where they can serve New Brunswickers' needs, and we need to constantly look at where we put resources to deliver the best health care and the best education to New Brunswick students and New Brunswick patients. We will continue to do that until New Brunswickers—

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. That is a no. The Premier doesn't know. All she did was talk from talking points about the importance of health care. We all know the importance of health care. This was the question: Is she going to use LPNs to replace RNs? We have been hearing rumours that people are going to be moved out of positions they are qualified for and that this government wants to take people who have a different set of qualifications and skills and put them into those positions. That is wrong. They're doing the same thing.

Now, I can tell you that we're also hearing that, with the extra \$5 000 that the nurses were supposed to get on April 1, there are strings attached. There are some questions within the nursing group, and they're not really comfortable with what they have to sign. Will the Premier confirm whether RNs are going to be replaced with LPNs in the health care system? Is this true? Is it a rumour? Is it right? Is it—

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I would be interested in speaking with the member about where these rumours are coming from, because our government is committed to registered nurses. They are not getting laid off under our government. In fact, we need more and more of them, which is why we issued retention bonuses last year and why the second phase of retention bonuses is coming right now. Part of our commitment to nurses is to show them how much we value them, after they've been through six years of not being valued by the previous government. We are going to keep and retain every registered nurse in this province and show them how valued they are, because we need them. If we're going to improve health care services for New Brunswickers, we desperately need those registered nurses to be part of the system, to stick with us as we get through a very challenging time of limited resources, and to help us attract more nurses to the system. Our government is committed to improving health care in partnership with our respected registered nurses.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): We got more talking points and no answers, Madam Speaker. We all know the importance of health care, but this government is not being clear with people as to whether it's going to make that change between LPNs and RNs. However, I can promise you, Madam Speaker, that the official

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opposition will keep its ear to the ground. If this government either doesn't know or is planning to do this, we'll make sure that New Brunswickers know.

I have here a letter that says the letter of understanding for the \$5 000 retention bonus has added eligibility requirements for the \$5 000 payment that the union leadership didn't feel comfortable with, so here we go—string attached. All nurses is not all nurses. A \$5 000 retention bonus for all nurses has strings attached. There are eligibility requirements. Can the Premier clarify this? Can she let the province know that these nurses, who deserve this money, are going to get it with no strings attached? Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. We are excited to get the second phase of the retention bonus out to nurses with the support of the New Brunswick Nurses' Union. The request is for a commitment to serve for one year, because it is a retention bonus, so the funds are going out to the nurses who are committed to sticking with us for one year. I think, actually, it was a point of feedback that the opposition gave us on the first round of bonuses. It mentioned that the bonus didn't have any commitment to stay, so we thought that was something worth introducing because we're trying to stabilize the health care system. We want to make sure that we retain all the nursing resources, so, between the New Brunswick Nurses' Union and the government, we have asked for a one-year commitment of service to go with this retention bonus.

Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Leader of the Official Opposition, PC): Well, you know, I think maybe the Premier misspoke, Madam Speaker. I think she might have misspoken, because, in the letter, it says that the NBNU is trying to deal with the addition of a mandatory two-year return of service agreement. The Premier just said one, so she either doesn't know or misspoke.

I'll give her the benefit of the doubt, but I asked whether there were any strings attached. Please, just answer the question. Are you expecting to have any strings attached with these retention payments, or will you honour your commitment and give these people the \$5 000 that you promised?

We're already into the month of May, well past April 1. We're late, there are strings attached, and people are confused. Give them that clarity. Let them know: We will honour our commitment to give you that \$5 000. I would also like clarification on whether it is two years or one year. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Ms. Holt (Fredericton South-Silverwood, Premier; Minister responsible for Official Languages, L): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I am happy to clarify this because I want to make sure that nurses in New Brunswick understand that they are extremely important to the Holt government. We value their service and the contributions that they

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have made to date, and we want them to stick with us in the year ahead as we continue to try to stabilize our healthcare system and attract more nurses.

We do have a \$5 000 retention bonus coming to the nurses of New Brunswick. In exchange for that retention bonus, we're asking them to sign a one-year return of service to stick with us as we stabilize, invest in primary care, and support our healthcare system. Nurses are valuable, their work is valuable, and we would love to continue to work with them over the year ahead.

[Translation]

BUDGET

Madam Speaker (Hon. Ms. Landry): I recognize the governmental leader... She's the House Leader... My goodness.

[Original]

I recognize the official Opposition House Leader.

Ms. M. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, PC): You can call me whatever you want, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker (Hon. Ms. Landry): No, I don't want to do that.

Ms. M. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, PC): I like you that much.

Madam Speaker, thank you very much for the opportunity to ask some questions. The Child and Youth Advocate warns that the \$47.1-million cut to child welfare services, which is nearly 25% of the budget, could devastate over 1 000 children in care. What was the government thinking slashing funding for our most vulnerable without a clear plan?

Will the Minister of Social Development commit to tabling a detailed report by June 30, 2025, as the advocate asked, that explains how these cuts will not harm children's education, safety, or futures, as the Premier promised?

Hon. Ms. Miles (Hanwell-New Maryland, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, L): Madam Speaker, through you to the member opposite, thank you again for the question. As I said before, I'm so happy that children and youth are finally front and centre in conversations in all our communities, as they should be.

Going back to the advocate's report, we came out publicly and said we would commit to June 30. We had already begun this process before the advocate's report even came out. We

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have a three-year action plan, and we look forward to being able to bring that to community partners by the end of June as well. We feel that it is important that our community partners are part of that conversation. Youth and families that are impacted by these conversations need to be involved in that as well.

We're going to go back and work with our community partners and the advocate's office to meet the June 30 deadline. Again, before this advocate's report came out, we were already ahead on a three-year action plan. As folks in the House know, the Act is to be reviewed every five years and seven years after that. We're in preparation for that five-year review, and we have an action plan in place going forward.

[Translation]

Madam Speaker (Hon. Ms. Landry): I recognize the official Opposition House Leader.

Ms. M. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, PC): Perfect.

[Original]

Thank you for the answer to that question. I am thrilled to hear that the report will be tabled by the June 30 deadline. That's good news.

Madam Speaker, Minister Miles claims that the \$208.3-million child welfare budget is sufficient, despite being \$23.5 million less than last year's actual annual spending. How can New Brunswickers trust the government when the advocate is calling this the largest cut in decades? What were they thinking? Will the minister provide quarterly spending reports, as demanded by Kelly Lamrock, to prove that the \$17.2 million in new funds isn't just smoke and mirrors?

Hon. Ms. Miles (Hanwell-New Maryland, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, L): Madam Speaker, through you to the member opposite, we are working with our community partners. That includes the advocate's office as well. We have a great working relationship with them. We will be meeting quarterly with the advocate's office to discuss what our plans look like moving forward, as we will be with our community partners.

Permanency, Madam Speaker, is always the goal. This *Child and Youth Well-Being Act* is supporting those opportunities to do better at that. We have an incredible team at Social Development that worked hard, as did everyone... A lot of folks in this room worked hard on this Act to create this mechanism to move forward and do better for kids in the care system, with permanency as the first option. It is always the best option if it's safe.

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Now there are more supports going into kinship, more supports going into early intervention and prevention, and increased supports and services to support the transition of young folks aged 19 to 26. That is how we're going to move the needle. That is how we're going to better support youth and families in New Brunswick. Thank you.

Ms. M. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. My final question to the Minister of Social Development has to do with our youth again. Kids in care are not numbers, as she well knows. The minister has spent a lifetime working for these young people, and we congratulate her on that. These young people are our future, but the government still cut \$47.1 million from their services while failing to track whether they graduate or end up in jail. What was the government thinking by ignoring these kids' outcomes? I'm a little disillusioned. Will the minister reverse these cuts or at least fund data collection, as was mandated in 2022, to ensure that we are not failing the 735 children who are in permanent care?

Hon. Ms. Miles (Hanwell-New Maryland, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, L): Madam Speaker, through you to the member opposite, yes, those outcomes were mandated. As the member opposite pointed out, this is a conversation that I have been involved in for years, before I sat down in this seat.

When I came into this ministerial position, one of the first things I asked was this: How many young folks from the care system do we have graduating from high school? I was surprised that we couldn't get those numbers. I am very much looking forward, Madam Speaker, to being able to share those numbers. Well, "looking forward" may not be quite the right words, but we will have those numbers in the coming months. The data is being collected now as we work with our partners at the Department of Education. We'll be able to better target and better support our folks once we have those numbers. I was very surprised that it wasn't a priority of the previous government to get those numbers. Thank you.

ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Mitton (Tantramar, G): Madam Speaker, it has now been six months since over 174 000 litres of diesel fuel leaked from the underground storage tanks of the Irving gas station in Woodstock. Residents are still waiting for answers. They are worried about their drinking water from nearby wells, especially considering that the leak could be a long-term concern. Diesel can stay in the soil for a long time before contaminating groundwater.

During the estimates committee on April 10, the Minister of Environment told me that he didn't know when Murray's Irving was last inspected prior to the leak but that he would get

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back to me with the answer. A month later, I haven't received any response from his department. Can the minister finally answer: When was the last time Murray's Irving was inspected prior to the diesel leak in December?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, Minister of Environment and Climate Change; Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you to the member opposite for the question. We're still looking for the answer to this question. Our inspectors do a number of tests and analyses every year. There are hundreds of annual inspections. Unfortunately, our computer system doesn't enable us to find the data easily, so we must go through the files. As soon as we have an answer, we will pass it on to the member opposite. The answer will also be in the report that we will table in the next few weeks. I'm as curious as you are about this process and when the assessments were done there.

I want to remind the member opposite that we have taken additional steps—I say “additional” because we are already doing additional tests and inspections at gas retailers—and will continue to monitor the results, and, if necessary, impose sanctions. Thank you.

[Original]

Ms. Mitton (Tantramar, G): Madam Speaker, it's very concerning that the department can't find that answer after a month of looking for it. I'm really concerned about that. I think New Brunswickers are losing trust in the Department of Environment's ability to perform inspections, enforce regulations, and even find the answer to the question about when the last inspection happened.

The Minister of Environment also told me that only 369 of the province's 440 gas stations have been inspected in the past five years. Of the 30 recently inspected, 14 failed. That's not a passing grade, Madam Speaker. It makes me very concerned about gas stations that have not been recently inspected. The minister still can't tell me when Murray's Irving was last inspected. He's had close to a month. I'd like him to reveal that date. Can the minister tell us about his plan to ensure that gas stations are meeting the safety standards set out in the *Petroleum Product Storage and Handling Regulation*?

Hon. Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, Minister of Environment and Climate Change; Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, L): Thank you.

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[Translation]

Thank you, Madam Speaker. I thank the member opposite for her question. I think it is necessary to understand how a department works. It is also necessary to understand the scope of the role and responsibilities of each inspector. That is the information we have tried to provide to the member opposite.

Madam Speaker, I remind you that, in the past year, 2 100 inspections were done. There were 139 noncompliance reports, 135 warnings, and 20 tickets. This process takes a huge amount of time. If we had access to other resources to do the work, we would use them.

That is why we are in the first phase of our gas station inspections. We are discovering what is missing in our process. We are looking at which rules retailers aren't obeying, in order to strengthen the regulations mentioned by the member opposite. Once we have...

[Original]

EDUCATION

Mr. Hogan (Woodstock-Hartland, PC): Thank you, Madam Speaker. In a news release on April 28, the government said that it's "investing in transformational change to improve the services" for New Brunswickers. When I heard the Minister of Education on CBC radio, she was talking about the transformational change that's going to happen or is happening in education. Then she talked about the \$200-million investment with a micro-cut to the districts, which adds up to \$43 million. Where did that \$43 million come from? Well, Anglophone West is cutting librarians. I found out today that Anglophone South is cutting librarians, and Francophone sud said it can't find \$7 million plus in its budget. My question for the Minister of Education is this: How are these cuts going to improve education for the students of our province?

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the opportunity to talk about the investments we're making in education. We have invested \$200 million more than the previous government, and we are targeting this investment to see transformational change in literacy. We're investing in academic support teachers. We are investing in educational assistants. We are investing in behavioural intervention mentors, and we are going to be tracking this progress year after year after year, as we promised in the state of the province address. We are accountable to New Brunswickers, and we want to see outcomes. That's what transformational change looks like, but it takes a little bit of time. We're working on it with the districts right now, and we're making it happen. Thank you.

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Mr. Hogan (Woodstock-Hartland, PC): Madam Speaker, I hope the micro-cuts don't impact the supply of paper or dry-erase markers in the classrooms. Just on a point of interest for the minister, we introduced academic support teachers because they work, and I support that. Behaviour intervention mentors work. It has been demonstrated that they work. I agree that certified teachers need to be before children. There are 150 teachers going back to classrooms from the districts and the department. I'd like to know where exactly they're coming from. What roles are they filling? Who is going to fill the gap in what they're currently doing, or are they in positions that we simply don't need?

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite. Yes, we want qualified teachers. We have lots of qualified teachers in New Brunswick. We need them in our classrooms. We want the best possible people teaching our students. We've heard that from teachers again and again. We've heard it from parents.

What we're going to do is redistribute those resources back to the classrooms, back to the schools, because that's where the supports are needed. That's where students learn—in classrooms in our schools. Resources need to be placed there. We all agree on this. We're making it happen, and this is part of the transformational change, once again, to stabilize our classrooms and put resources where they are needed, close to students in our classrooms.

Mr. Hogan (Woodstock-Hartland, PC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I'm not quite sure what the people who are going back to the classrooms are currently doing. Apparently, what they are doing is not important since we can do without them. I do support the fact that they're certified teachers. Putting certified teachers in front of children should be our first obligation. They are the people we need to have in front of children to give them the best opportunity to get the best education possible.

Now, when I grew up, if I wasn't doing well enough, I got extra help. If I wasn't trying hard enough, I was told to try harder. I don't understand the philosophy that our results are poor, and they have been poor, and there are even things that have been and are continuing to be implemented by this current government to improve academic results in our classrooms, yet the answer is this: Let's reduce and lower our expectations. Can the minister explain to me why that is a good idea?

Hon. C. Johnson (Moncton South, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, L): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the chance to talk about exactly how we're going to be tracking our progress. In the state of the province address, we committed to New Brunswickers that we would track literacy rates, numeracy rates, and chronic absenteeism. That means we are going to be measuring them and reporting them year after year. We expect an increase in results. We expect these results to

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increase year after year because we have committed to investing in academic support teachers and behaviour intervention mentors. We know this is going to improve literacy rates. We have committed to tracking and evaluating year after year and to reporting back to New Brunswickers because we are accountable to them. We are accountable to students, to parents, and to all New Brunswickers. Thank you.

Point of order

Mr. M. LeBlanc (Belle-Baie-Belledune, L): On a point of order, Madam Speaker, my good friend, the official opposition House leader, referred to one of our ministers by name. This is just a reminder that we're not to refer to our ministers by their first names in this Legislative Assembly.

[*Translation*]

Madam Speaker (Hon. Ms. Landry): This point of order is well taken. I remind you that we must refer to ministers by their departments, not their names. Thank you.

(Interjection.)

Madam Speaker (Hon. Ms. Landry): Yes.

Question period is over.